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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAMAKO 000085

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TAGS: PTER PINS PINR PREL PGOV ASEC ML

SUBJECT: IS THE REBELLION OVER? MALI BEATS BACK BAHANGA AND PREPARES FOR PEACE IN KIDAL

REF: A. BAMAKO 00036

- 1B. BAMAKO 00047
- 1C. BAMAKO 00058
- 1D. BAMAKO 00012
- 1E. BAMAKO 00069

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) Summary: Tuareg rebel leader Ibrahim Bahanga's hold over northern Mali seemingly reached an end on February 7 as paramilitary groups led by northern Malian military officers pushed Bahanga and his rapidly dwindling number of followers across the Malian border into Algeria. While it is perhaps too early to know whether the stars over northern Mali have - for the first time since fighting resumed in May 2006 - aligned in Mali's favor, a confluence of factors have come together to create not the perfect storm but rather the perfect clear sky, perhaps signaling the beginning of the end of Mali's simmering third Tuareg rebellion. These factors include President Amadou Toumani Toure's decision to meet force with force after Bahanga's late December 2008 foray, via Mauritania, into central and western Mali; Mali's decision to unleash paramilitary units composed of regular and irregular Tuareg and Arab fighters against Bahanga's positions north-east of Kidal; Bahanga's banishment and the apparent implosion of his Northern Mali Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC); a new agreement between Mali and the Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC) regarding the ADC's return to Kidal, disarmament, and reintegration into mixed military units per the Algiers Accords; and indications that rivals Algeria and Libya are no longer working at cross-purposes in so far as Tuareg rebel movements are concerned. Bahanga's swift and stunning defeat suggests that President Toure and the Malian military actually can, when so required, mount an effective military campaign in northern Mali. If Mali and the ADC manage to engineer both a peaceful return to Kidal and the creation of mixed military units, the end of hostilities may enable the Malian government and Tuareg rebels to stop fighting one another and concentrate, instead, on other common enemies such as insecurity in the north and AQIM. End Summary.

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Bahanga: Exit, Stage Right  
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2.(C) Paramilitary units composed of northern Malians and led by two Malian military officers from northern Mali - Col. Elhadj Gamou and Col. Mohamed Abderahmane ould Meydou - pushed Tuareg rebel leader Ibrahim Bahanga across the Malian frontier and into Algeria on February 7. The news that

Bahanga was no longer in Mali capped a stunning reversal for the Tuareg rebel leader whose campaign of violence against the Malian military began almost two years earlier with an attack on the Malian military garrison in Tinzawatin in May, 2007.

3.(C) Since the New Year, Bahanga has suffered a number of increasingly important setbacks, including the capture of eight Tuareg rebels, including Bahanga ally Ahmed Anakib, by Malian forces on January 12 (Ref. A); the Malian military's claim to have captured what appears to have been Bahanga's deserted camp at Tin-Asalak on January 20; and the January 22 Battle of Bourghessa that may have resulted in the deaths of perhaps as many as 31 ATNMC members (Ref. B). On January 25 Bahanga unilaterally released the three remaining Malian military officers he had been holding as prisoners since mid-2008 and called a time-out from hostilities, which was promptly rebuffed by Malian officials (Ref. C). On February 2 Bahanga's father-in-law and Paris-based spokesman Hama ag Sid'Ahmed added to his already impressive collection of bizarre press releases by issuing a statement on behalf of the ATNMC claiming to have accepted a cease-fire offer supposedly articulated by "mediating" countries, "in particular Libya, Algeria, Mauritania, France, certain Malian political parties, Mali's technical and financial donors, and the United Nations." Ag Sid'Ahmed also registered a complaint over Mali's use of irregular militias against the ATNMC and warned that Mali was fanning the flames of ethnic civil war.

4.(U) On February 6 Agence France Presse reported that Mali  
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and the ADC had reached an agreement permitting the ADC to return to barracks in Kidal. AFP also reported that an estimated 35 members of Bahanga's ATNMC had asked Algeria to facilitate their disarmament and reintegration into the peace process. Hamma ag Moussa, whose brother Mohamed ag Moussa was executed along with ADC commander Barka ag Cheikh by unknown assailants in Kidal on April 11, 2008, is reportedly among those who have abandoned Bahanga and the ATNMC. On February 7, Malian and Algerian military sources told AFP that Bahanga was no longer on Malian soil and that Algeria had authorized, in accordance with a pre-existing pursuit agreement, Malian forces to enter Algeria to pursue Bahanga and those remaining loyal to the ATNMC. On February 9 the Malian newspaper l'Aube, which sometimes serves as the unofficial news outlet of the Malian government, reported that Bahanga had fled to Djannet, Algeria, and was negotiating terms of asylum with Libya. On February 10 the Malian military said it had captured all of Bahanga's logistical and operational bases as well as a significant quantity of arms, vehicles, and equipment, placing northern Mali fully under the control of Malian security forces.

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A Northern Answer for a Northern Problem  
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5.(C) Bahanga's late December 2008 foray into Mali's central and western regions of Segou and Koulikoro via Mauritania triggered a noticeable shift in Malian tactics. President Toure signaled his decision to revert to force just hours after Bahanga's December 20 attack on Nampala, declaring "enough is enough." The President alluded to this shift in more detail during a brief interview with Radio France (RFI) on February 6. When asked by RFI to explain the reasons for his evident fury following Nampala, President Toure said: "I admit that we spent two or three years trying to restrain ourselves. We tried everything. . . Unfortunately we were facing a group which had not one stated demand. Their only demand was simply the withdrawal of the army from the north, but I think this is a group with close ties to narcotraffickers." President Toure went on to explain that Mali knew Bahanga was hovering near Nampala prior to the December 20 attack: "We are not short of means; we are not

lacking intelligence either. We knew they were in that zone."

Apparently referring to assistance from unnamed individuals in Mauritania, President Toure said Bahanga's group "benefited from a certain complicity which I would prefer not to mention which enabled them to approach our frontiers and get to Nampala. But, today, we have decided to change. We have adapted." At another point in the interview President Toure stated: "I think that Bahanga has never respected a negotiated agreement. Never. He is a warrior. All that matters to him is a show of force, and we are going to show him some force."

6.(C) A second important shift in Malian military tactics was the mass mobilization of Tuareg and Arab members of the Malian military and locally recruited Tuareg and Arab militiamen. Prior to Nampala, Mali relied primarily on its regular military composed mostly of soldiers from southern Mali for combat in Kidal. The Nampala attack and President Toure's evident exasperation presaged the unleashing of Mali's irregular militia units led by Col. Gamou and Col. ould Meydou. Col. Gamou constituted a militia of primarily Imghad Tuareg fighters in mid-2008 to counter Tuareg rebels and also provide Gamou, who is an Imghad Tuareg from Gao, with his own trusted security and information network. In 2008 Col. Gamou's militia engaged with Tuareg rebels from time to time but never seriously attempted to track Bahanga. This changed after Nampala.

7.(C) On February 6 President Toure told French radio that Mali's armed forces counted more than 3,000 soldiers of northern descent, although this appears to be seriously inflated. "The essential factor therefore being knowledge of the terrain," said President Toure, "we rapidly created Saharan units which know the terrain as well as the (rebels)." The addition of Arab forces led by Col. ould Meydou, together with Tuaregs led by Col. Gamou, gave the Malians a one-two punch combination that left Bahanga reeling. Ould Meydou was among those dispatched from Bamako to Kidal after Bahanga's attack on Nampala. An ethnic Telemci Arab, ould Meydou brought with him not only a cadre

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of Arab soldiers loyal to the Malian government, but also a group of newly formed Arab militia men.

8.(C) According to our Defense Attaché's Office, all Malian military units in northern Mali are organized into company-size combined armed task forces, also known as ETIAs. General Gabriel Poudiougou, Chief of Staff of Mali's armed forces, pushed for this reorganization during his early January 2009 relocation to Gao, from where General Poudiougou has been overseeing ground operations against Bahanga. Incorporating ould Meydou and Gamou's paramilitary units into these ETIAs gave Mali a significant operational advantage in the north as it meant that southern Malian soldiers need no longer be deployed to fight against Tuareg rebels. At the same time, the Malian army garnered credit for operations that were largely carried out by ould Meydou and Gamou's locally recruited soldiers. Though General Poudiougou directs overall ground operations, Col. ould Meydou exercises wide latitude in the use of his paramilitary force. Another point worth noting is that when reporting tactical military intelligence to the field, Mali's Military Intelligence Directorate contacts both Gen. Poudiougou and Col. ould Meydou. Our Defense Attaché also reports that Malian officers in Bamako communicate with Col. ould Meydou through a Malian Arab interpreter as neither ould Meydou nor members of his militia speak fluent French.

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A Return to the Algiers Accords  
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9.(C) In case unleashing "Saharan Units" led by Col. Gamou and Col. Meydou didn't give Bahanga enough things to worry about, Malian and Tuareg leaders in Kidal stepped up efforts

to convince the ADC to return to Kidal. The ADC was supposed to have returned to Kidal on January 5 but balked at the last moment after Malian military authorities refused to let the rebels enter Kidal with their weapons (Ref. D). Since the failure of the January 5-7 talks between Mali and the ADC in Kidal, several Tuareg officials led by National Assembly Deputy Alghabass ag Intallah have been shuttling back and forth between Kidal and the ADC's temporary camp about 60 KM outside of Kidal in search of an amenable solution. The new agreement divides ADC members into those who formerly belonged to the Malian military and those who did not.

Former members of the Malian military will be allowed to return to Kidal with their weapons on February 15. They will then symbolically turn over their arms before being reintegrated back into the Malian military. ADC fighters who were never part of the Malian armed forces will give up their guns before entering the city. Latest press reports indicate anywhere from 300 to 500 Tuareg fighters, including many who have recently deserted Bahanga's ATNMC, are now ready to return to Kidal.

10.(C) As a side-bar to discussions between the ADC and Mali in Kidal, at least one prominent Tuareg Idnane leader has been shuttling back and forth between Libya and Tessalit to secure the disarmament of ADC's Tuareg Idnane faction led by National Assembly Deputy and renowned trafficker Deity ag Sidamou. Mohamed ag Erlaf, a former Malian government Minister and currently Director of the Malian Agency for Local Investment, recently left Bamako for Tessalit to facilitate the disarmament of Tuareg rebels led by ag Sidamou. Ag Erlaf and other Idnane leaders arranged a January 19 disarmament ceremony for Idnane Tuaregs who were portrayed as former rebels but in reality likely had little, if any, connection to the current conflict in northern Mali (Ref. E). Ag Sidamou, however, is the real deal as far as Tuareg Idnane rebels are concerned. While ag Sidamou is listed as the ADC's "Finance Secretary" his operations as both trafficker and rebel are largely independent of the ADC.

After traveling to Tripoli in late January, ag Erlaf reportedly returned to northern Mali, armed with funds needed to convince ag Sidamou to return to his day job as one of Mali's highest elected officials. Ag Erlaf's Libyan supported initiative seems to indicate that instead of working at cross-purposes vis-a-vis Tuareg rebels as Libya and Algeria have done in the past, the two north African rivals have divided the various Tuareg rebel movements into those over which each nation has the most influence, with Libya taking on the Bahanga and Idnane portfolios and Algeria assuming the larger and central ADC file.

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11.(C) One issue that seriously complicated previous attempts to convince the ADC to return to Kidal but has strangely not surfaced this time is the composition and role of the mixed military units to be created by the Algiers Accords. Previous disagreements between the various Tuareg camps and Malian leaders have centered around who would command the one or more mixed units once created. Tuareg sources indicate that mixed units now in view would be more closely controlled by Malian military command in Bamako than previous iterations which Malians regarded as giving Tuareg ex-rebels too much independent authority.

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Comment: Too Good to be True?  
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12.(C) Mali's swift and remarkably successful action against Bahanga has many wondering why it took the Malian government nearly two years to reach what, on the surface, appears to have been a relatively straightforward action plan. Bahanga's exile to Libya, should it be confirmed, would be welcome even though it still leaves Bahanga within striking distance of northern Mali. This is not the first time Bahanga has withdrawn to neighboring nations, but it is the

first time he has been forced to flee by military action. Mali may now depend on Libya and Algeria to keep close tabs on Bahanga's whereabouts - something neither nation has proved particularly willing or able to do in the past. Algeria's mediation with mainstream ADC leaders and Libya's overtures to the more peripheral but still important Tuareg Idnane rebel leaders, however, may indicate that Algeria and Libya are no longer working at cross-purposes in so far as Tuareg rebel movements are concerned.

13.(C) It now appears that the Malian military actually can, with the help of local paramilitary units, function rather effectively in northern Mali. If the ADC's return to Kidal goes as planned and one or more mixed military units are in fact created per the Algiers Accords, an end to hostilities with the Malian government may enable northern units commanded by Bamako to turn their sights on other pressing northern security matters including AQIM.

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